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FIGURE I—LATER FLORENTINE TABLE OF ORNATE DESIGN

## English Furniture of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

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OUT of the gloom of the Dark Ages emerged the architectural style known as Gothic. Being essentially a northern style, as its very name implies (used first as a term of reproach, to designate the rude barbarian hordes which descended upon and conquered the decadent Romans, and were in turn civilized by them), it naturally found its greatest development in the northern countries, which are now known as France, Germany and England. The Italian Gothic developed from, and was modified by, the Early Christian and Romanesque styles, neither of which it wholly superseded, as, on Italian soil,

Roman tradition was too strong to be wholly uprooted.

This period was characterized by great religious fervor; the Church was everything, and the domestic dwelling subordinate. It was an era unparalleled in ecclesiastical achievement, and its monuments still

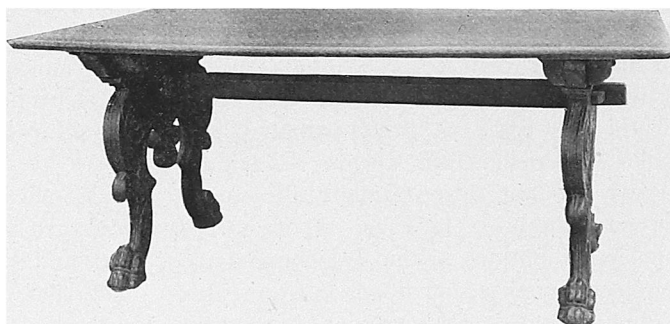


FIGURE II—TABLE WITH CARVED END SUPPORTS  
ITALIAN RENAISSANCE, SIXTEENTH CENTURY



FIGURE III—EARLY FLORENTINE TABLE OF SIMPLE GOTHIC CONSTRUCTION

endure as the noblest and most fitting architectural expression of man's spiritual aspiration. "Every art contributed to the minister; the architect, the sculptor, the painter, the woodcarver, the weaver of tapestry, the maker of glass . . . brought the offering of their skill, and the resources of their arts to the worship of God."

The furniture of the period, designed mainly for the church and the monastery, was essentially architectural in character—simple and sincere in construction, but often exquisitely embellished by decoration, as witness choir-stalls, screens, and bishop's chairs with their carvings and traceries.

Furniture for domestic use was not plentiful, and, while similar in design to that of the church was usually plainer and ruder. The chair of the master was often the only one the house afforded, with perhaps an extra one for the mistress or the distinguished guest; the remainder of the household occupying benches or folding stools.

The dining table was a board, sometimes hinged for convenience in handling, supported on trestles. This had various uses other than for meals, often serving as a bed for the weary traveler seeking accommodation.

Another form of table, designed for study, is of sturdy construction, with heavy bases supporting the legs, and fixed, box-like top, sometimes decorated with flat carving. Such a table was used by Luther in his study at Wittenberg, and is really the prototype of the modern mission style of table, probably

originating in the monk's cell, and developed by him according to his need.

The main article of Gothic furniture, and most important, both in this period, and in its influence upon succeeding ones, was the chest developed from the hollowed log of pre-historic times, and, in its turn, transformed into settle, cabinet and wardrobe. In the church the chest with its beautifully carved panels, and wonderfully designed locks, was the treasure house of priceless vestments and tapestries; while in the home it served a similar purpose in safeguarding wall-hangings and silken raiment when not in use. Furthermore, as even the wealthiest of families had but one set of furnishings,

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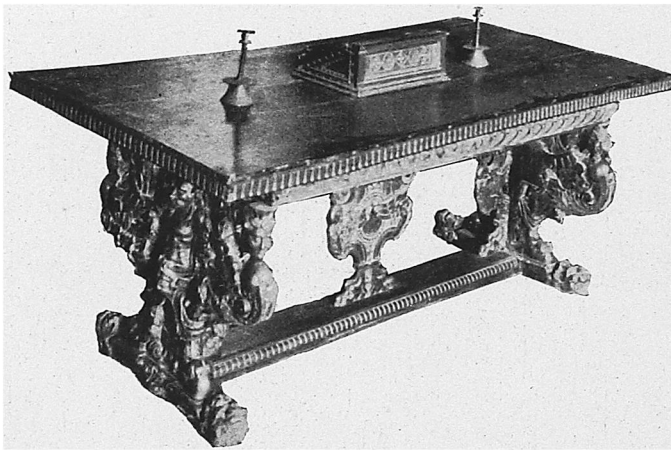


FIGURE IV—TABLE OF GOTHIC CONSTRUCTION WITH RENAISSANCE DECORATION

the chest was often called into requisition for traveling purposes. "Great nobles, and even plain citizens of wealth, used to travel about with all their family goods packed in huge chests which at stopping places served as furniture."

Italy, never having become wholly imbued with the Gothic idea, was the first to cast it aside, and we find the Renaissance developing there a full century in advance of the northern countries, and serving as a font of inspiration to them in their later awakening. With the ushering in of the Renaissance a new spirit entered into art. There was a revival of the Greek feeling of joy in life, of recognition of the individual—and with it came the desire for personal expression. This took the form of increased interest in the dwelling and its furnishings.

The great Gothic church-building period was thus succeeded by a corresponding revival of home building and furnishing, as witness the splendid palaces of the Strozzi and Riccardi in Florence, the Louvre and Cha-

teaux of France, and Hatfield House, England; as well as the humbler homes of the middle-class.

The first expression of the Renaissance was the engrafting of classic decorative motives upon Gothic construction. The trefoils, quatrefoils, crosses, and other forms of Christian symbolism gave way to caryatids, dolphins, and all manner of strange beast and bird; the acanthus returned to the prestige which it had held under the Greeks and Romans; classic designs on

mouldings abounded, and exquisite arabesque traceries upon panel and pilaster.

In the Gothic and Greek periods, decoration grew out of structural conditions, and hence was in perfect accord with them. Not so with the Renaissance, a characteristic feature of which is the decorative use of structural motives, as was of the Roman before it. Explanation may lie in the fact that the fronts of chests and cabinets were considered architecturally, and treated accord-



FIGURE V—RENAISSANCE TABLE FROM THE MUSEUM OF CARNAVALET, PARIS

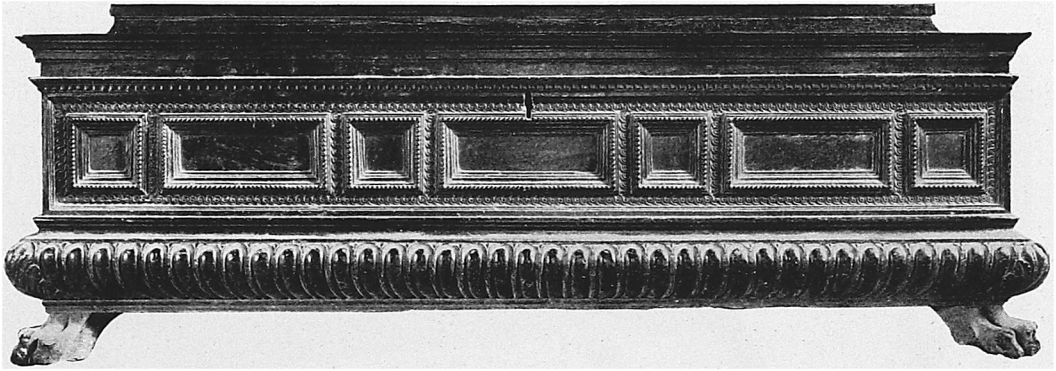


FIGURE VI—ITALIAN WEDDING CHEST, SIXTEENTH CENTURY

ingly, with pediments, columns, pilasters and other features characteristic of Renaissance architecture.

Italy being the source from which other countries drew inspiration, a survey of her

FIGURE VII—CHAIR, ITALIAN DESIGN  
—Courtesy S. Karpen & Brothers

art is essential to intelligent appreciation of the styles which developed through her influence. As in painting the rise, perfection and decadence of Italian art may be traced, so in furniture, the three stages may be noted. Taking, for example, a series of tables, in an old Florentine palace, we find, first (Fig. III), a table of simple Gothic construction, the heaviness of the side pieces modified by graceful curved outlines, which are repeated in the lines of carving that form the decoration. The contour of the box-top is modified by a series of receding cornices, each decorated with chaste classic designs. The underbracing, carried high, is unobtrusive, and in accord with other contour lines, the whole bespeaking a wholesome simplicity and refinement. Similar in spirit is a table in the Metropolitan Museum (Fig. II), in which the side pieces, whole at the top, each branch into two graceful scroll legs, terminating in lion's claws; a plain underbrace, carried high, and secured by a dowel joint, gives the required firmness, while the top is a perfectly plain board—for which one of the beautiful old Italian embroidered towels of this period, or a fine brocade, would make a perfect covering.

The example of the second stage (Fig. I), still of Gothic construction, is further modified and enriched, to meet the increasing demand for elegance and richness of a people who have become accustomed to the luxuries of life. The base, still firm and



FIGURE VIII—CHAIR, VENETIAN DESIGN  
—Courtesy S. Karpen & Brothers

solid on the floor, supports a finely formed pedestal, the two elements unified by the ever-ready scroll. From the base of the pedestal on either side is carried strong underbracing, the straight lines of which are softened below by finely carved scrolls with leafage design, and above by a series of ornamental spindles, which form an added support to the top. The projecting board of the box-top is supported by scroll-brackets, finely carved. A still further support to the heavy box-top, which is of the style known as a "draw-table," an early form of

extension, is given by graceful leafage scrolls on either side of the pedestal top, serving also the aesthetic purpose of transition between two opposing elements. This table has been dwelt upon in detail, because much that is finest and best in French and English furniture development may be traced to similar sources. It is a curious fact that the "split-spindle," which has been regarded as an original Jacobean motive, is found upon the underframing of this table, as is also the flat carving in guilloche design, copied from the Greek, which was extensively used upon Jacobean pieces. So similar in line and decorative treatment is a table (Fig. V) in the Musée Carnavalet, in Paris, that the direct influence of the Italian is plainly proven.

The third, or decadent period is shown in a table (Fig. IV), which, though still based upon familiar structural lines, lacks the elements of fine proportion, restraint, and unity of idea. The side supports, each in one solid piece, are a mass of incongruous design in carving, with little regard for beauty of contour. Grotesques in human form, scrolls, and that confusion of shapes known as "rococo" (rocks and shells) form a jumble of ideas which disturb like discordant sounds. The underbox, resting upon these supports, which in turn carries an overheavy top, is decorated with the characteristic and beautiful Italian "nulling," which by contrast renders the rococo end supports still more intolerable. While this decadent style had its blighting influence upon French art, the more restrained north-

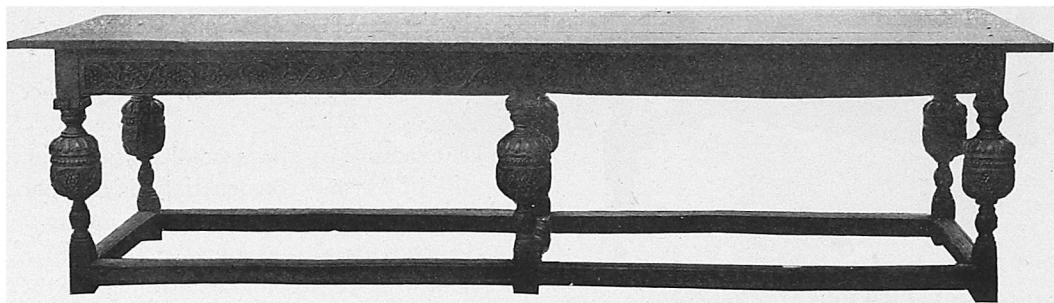


FIGURE IX—ENGLISH DINING TABLE, SEVENTEENTH CENTURY





FIGURE X—ENGLISH DINING TABLE, SEVENTEENTH CENTURY  
—Courtesy S. Karpen & Brothers

ern temperament of the English was less attracted by its redundant charms.

The same successive stages of growth, perfection and decline might be traced in other pieces of furniture, did space permit. The cassone, or wedding-chest, which formed an essential part of the bride's dowry, was first hardly more than a plain wooden box with simple mouldings. Later it became a thing of beauty (Fig. VI), with its full-curved base resting upon lion's feet, and its finely proportioned panels, all exquisitely carved in restrained classic design. Finally came the overdoing, which inevitably proved to be its undoing, through redundancy of curvature and decoration or gilding.

The vitrine, or cabinet with glass doors, behind which were displayed rare porcelains, carvings and other articles of *virtu*, reached a stage of perfection in the hands of Italian artisans, emulated but seldom equalled, by other countries. Indeed, so great was their superiority and the demand for them, that they were exported in large num-

bers to the northern countries toward the end of the sixteenth century, where they served as a leaven in their influence upon the artisans of those countries.

Of all articles of Italian furniture, the chair has had the greatest and most direct influence upon the styles of other countries. Plain at first, and wholly of wood construction, its sturdy base and underframing revealing its Gothic origin;

gradually it underwent transformation into the perfect type which has been at once the joy and despair of its imitators. Adhering persistently to the straight leg and underframing, great beauty was produced through the embellishment of its structural features, especially that of the front brace, which was gracefully formed and richly carved. The frame work of the back, when in evidence, was also luxuriant with carving (Fig. VII).



FIGURE XI—CARVED CHEST OF DRAWERS, AMERICAN  
LATE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY, JACOBAN STYLE

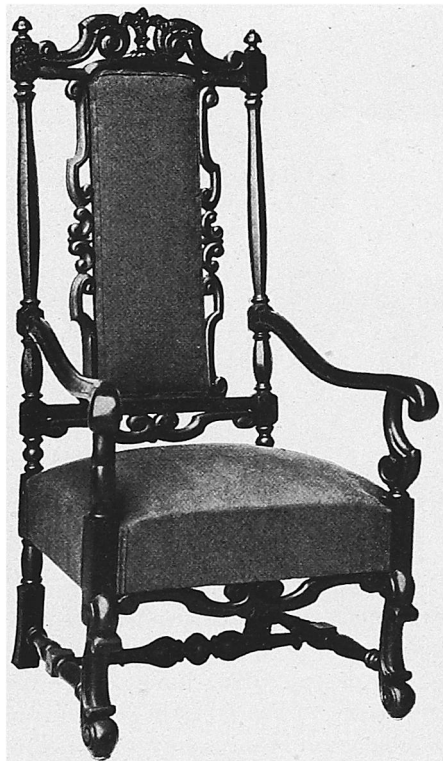


FIGURE XII—ENGLISH CHAIR, PERIOD CHARLES II —Courtesy S. Karpen & Brothers

If covered with upholstery, then terminals, rich in carving, and perhaps gilding, formed an exquisite finish to the back posts. The upholstery of these stately chairs was usually of rich Italian velvets, finished with galloons; but sometimes, leather, stamped and gilded, such as we associate with Spain, was used, held in place by ornamental brass and copper headed nails.

Another type of seat, much in vogue, and sometimes termed "Venetian" (Fig. VIII), consists of X shaped braces, front and back, connected by underframing. The low back (if any) and seat were softened by richly wrought cushions. This type of construction was greatly in favor in Great Britain during the early Jacobean period. More austere was the so-called "Savonarola" chair, of similar construction, but wholly of wood—a favorite among souvenir collectors of the present day, but having little vogue in its own time outside of Italy. There

should also be noted, for commoner use, the plain folding chair, which seems to have been used by all peoples, in all times, under similar conditions.

By a happy chance, the Renaissance in the north developing almost simultaneously in France, Flanders and England, in the early years of the sixteenth century, came at a time when the Italian period was in its prime.

Less fortunate is the fact that the habit of imitation thus formed continued long after the artistic quality of Italian productions had begun to decline, and thus is seen later the melancholy spectacle of the excesses of the rococo style reaching a still greater frenzy of artistic lawlessness in France, Germany, Spain (as "baroque") and Austria.

Flanders being at this time the greatest maritime power in Europe, with Antwerp her main shipping port, it was natural that Italian influence should be felt there in advance of other countries; although France

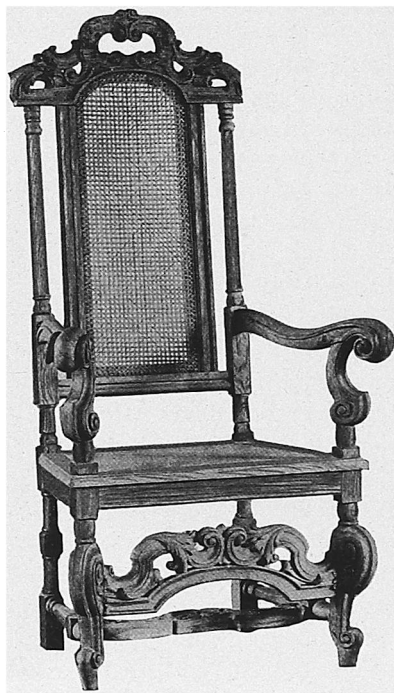


FIGURE XIII—ENGLISH CHAIR, PERIOD WILLIAM AND MARY

—Courtesy S. Karpen & Brothers





FIGURE XIV—SIX LEGGED CHEST OF DRAWERS OF HIGHBOY—EARLY QUEEN ANNE, LAST QUARTER SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

was a close second, Italian artists and artisans having been invited there by Charles XII. in 1502, and by his successor, Francis I., a few years later.

Not to be outdone by his distinguished contemporaries in France and the Netherlands, Henry VIII. of England also invited artists and artisans direct from Italy, and by way of France, as well. Having espoused the Protestant religion, he was only too ready to put aside everything Gothic, savoring, as it did, of the Papacy. Thus did the furniture of England become an imitation of the Italian, with due allowance for differences of environment and temperament.

Heretofore English furniture had been

decidedly heavy and clumsy in character, and the habits of generations could not easily be set aside. Doubtless also the volatile Italian was affected by the more gloomy and depressing atmosphere of England, as contrasted with his sunny Italy, and so we find the stolid British temperament reacting upon the impressionable Latin.

Elizabeth, coming to the throne in the middle of the sixteenth century, continued the traditions established by her father, through the period bearing her name, which extended to the century's close.

Massive elegance was the characteristic feature of this period, as may be seen by consulting contemporary inventories. Magnificent apartments were fitted up, as for example, at Kenilworth, with wall-hangings of "tapestry, gilt and red leather," "carpets" for the tables and windows of "crimson velvet, richly embroidered and garnished with gold lace," and the floor, "a great Turkey carpet. \* \* \* being in length ten yards and in breadth four yards, and a quarter," while from the roof hung "great brazen candlesticks with twenty-four branches."

The furniture accompanying this gorgeous setting was correspondingly rich and imposing. Against the walls of the long galleries were placed massive chairs, upholstered in crimson velvet, such as have been noted in Italian palaces, seat and back embroidered in coat-of-arms. Cabinets also were there, perhaps imported directly from Italy, or at least, of Italian inspiration.

In the great hall were a number of tables and "forms" (benches), "long and short." These were of simple, strong construction, with four to six legs, according to constructive requirements. The legs were in some instances turned—a characteristic Elizabethan feature, and, in others, finely designed and carved in the "acorn" motive of the period (Figures IX and X). Low under-framing served the double purpose of strengthening the construction, and affording a foot-rest above the draughty and sometimes rush-strewn floor.

But, though the table itself may have been somewhat plain for the times, its fittings were of amazing elaboration. We read, for instance, that the "Earl and lady occupied the upper end of the table, while Varney and Foster sat *beneath the salt*, as was the custom with inferiors." The "salt" in question being of mother-of-pearl, designed in "ship-fashion, with Dame Fortune on the stern." Equally imposing must have been the "knife-case" of wood, painted and gilt, the design being "St. George on horseback with table knives in tail, and oyster knives in breast!" To accommodate these and other table-furnishings when not in use, the court-cupboard came into requisition; at first but an assemblage of shelves, later the upper portion was enclosed—and finally, in the following century, both top and bottom were sometimes enclosed by doors, and thus was evolved the press cupboard.

One article of furnishing might surely lay claim to northern origin, and that was the massive and elaborate "chimney-piece" of the colder countries, the focus of interest in the great hall—upon which designer and carver bestowed their highest skill. Forming a connecting link between architecture and movable furniture, it partook somewhat of the character of each. Massive columns or pilasters richly carved supported the mantel-shelf, itself enriched by carved cornice and moulding. Above all this towered the "chimney-piece," an elaborate structure, with caryatid columns supporting a pediment, in keeping with the architectural decorations of doors, windows and facade. Accompanied by wall-panelling, or hangings of tapestry or leather, the combined effect was rich and harmonious.

Mention must be made of the bedstead, by far the most magnificent article of furniture of the Elizabethan period. Here is a description: "A bedstead made of walnut tree, top-fashioned, the pillars (columns?) red and varnished, the tester and single valance of crimson satin, paned with a broad border of bone lace of gold and silver \* \* \*

five plumes of colored feathers, garnished with bone lace, and spangles of gold and silver, standings in cups" (probably at center and four corners of tester). Accompanying it were curtains of crimson satin with gold trimmings, cover and quilts of the same materials, as well as an upholstered chair.

Again we turn to Italy to find the origin of this style, in the high post and tester, wrought in exquisite proportion and design during her perfect period. Fluted Ionic columns, springing from acanthus cups which in turn rest upon Roman vase forms, with lion-claw base, form the columns, while the panels of the tester are carved with lovely arabesque tracery.

But though similar in construction, the English bedstead falls short in artistic excellence; its columns are less chaste in contour and decoration, its headboard oppressively heavy, and its tester overpowering. Here again we have illustration of the difference in temperament between the two nationalities.

But influences were already at work destined to effect a change. In the latter part of Elizabeth's reign, a young English artist, Inigo Jones, went to Italy and made careful study of the old classic examples of art. Returning, he became the leading spirit in the development of English architecture and furniture, and thus was originated a truly native style, which takes the name Jacobean, from its ruling monarchs.

As in the preceding style, domestic architecture was imposing, by reason of its size and massiveness, but motives become more purely classic; pilasters, fluted columns, pediments and panelling being freely used in interiors as well as upon facades. Against this classic background was placed some of the finest furniture that has ever been produced.

The cupboard of the sixteenth century, originally a plain case of shelves, developed on the one hand into the court or livery cupboard, the top inclosed, with splayed

sides, and corner pillars; the lower portion open, for the display of fine china and silver. The supporting columns were usually turned, with a bulbous ornament somewhat resembling the acorn of the preceding period. Split spindles and well-proportioned panelling, defined by mouldings, formed the ornamentation of these cupboards, their main beauty being that of fine proportions and workmanship.

The press cupboard, on the other hand, having a greater expanse of surface, lent itself to more elaborate decoration; while panelling and split-spindles were also used, the richest effects were produced by flat-carving, a method peculiarly Jacobean, in which the relief is shallow, and the design seldom rounded or modelled. The motives were few and simple: the Greek guilloche, and other forms of braiding or strap-work; a design of over-lapping leaves seen also in Italian ornament, the scroll, and especially the circle and shapes formed by combinations of its segments. It is not exaggeration to say that the majority of Jacobean decorative motives originated in the circle: the stiff rosette curiously like a sunflower; the meander composed of half-circles alternating, thus forming a running vine enriched with leaves, and numerous other designs easily recognizable.

The chest, in use from the earliest times in England as elsewhere, became in this period a chest of drawers, lifted on legs which continued to the top as side-posts. The front thus formed a rich surface for the designer and carver, and was usually covered with an all-over effect of carving, singularly harmonious and pleasing, like a piece of old brocade or tapestry, in its flat relief (Fig. XI).

Another variation of the chest was the addition of back and arms, thus transforming it into a settle, the seat lifting as before: both back and front affording surface for rich carving. Thus was created another example of handsome furniture, in keeping with the interior decoration of the period. These settles were often placed on either side of the fire-place, at right angles to it, thus forming a warm, cosy nook, within the vast hall, an idea which is in vogue at the present day.

We are more accustomed to associate luxury with the later Stuarts, Charles II. and James II., than with their predecessors. But in the palace of Holyrood is a settee.

upholstered in crimson velvet, richly trimmed and embroidered in gold with the monograms of Charles I. and his queen; the framework elaborately carved and gilt. Still earlier is a style of chair used by James I., the frame of oak, gilded, and constructed in the curved X design which goes by the name of "Venitian." This also is cushioned in red velvet, with gold thread and studded with copper nails.

With the Restoration came an influx of new ideas. Charles II. returning in 1660 from exile in France and Holland, brought with him Continental ideas and standards, and workmen to execute them. Thus we find Flemish lightness and delicacy modifying English heaviness. Flanders, more nearly than any other country, had caught the beauty and perfection of the Italian chair, and through her it came to England. Thus was developed one of the most perfect types of chair England has ever possessed. The frame work, still straight in its main constructive lines, is softened by curved scrolls, used in arms, front brace, and as decoration of the back. Strong as is its construction, an effect of lightness is produced by the open back, consisting of panel and side-posts, joined at the top and base (Fig. XII). This panel and the seat were either caned or upholstered; if the latter, the material was usually tapestry. Another style of chair belonging to this period had a frame of spiral turning, with back and seat upholstered in "turkey-work," an Oriental fabric, woven by hand in complete patterns of required size.

With the accession of William and Mary in 1689 came various changes and new ideas. The chair which reached so high a degree of excellence in the preceding era retained the same general construction and contour, but was characterized by more of restraint and delicacy in its lines and decoration. The back was often solid, rather than open, but its contour was especially graceful, rising in the middle with a decoration of pierced carving (Fig. XIII).

The high chest of drawers, with its heavy horizontal cornice, and six turned legs, braced with under framing (Fig. XIV), brought from Holland by these sovereigns, was practically the last example of straight-line furniture, for the close of the century saw a change to the curved lines and cabriole legs of the Queen Anne period.